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## A Welcome Grace Note

Now that the American and Soviet academies of science have agreed to have joint leadership meetings from time to time, a fragile but promising footbridge is in the process of being assembled on behalf of conflict avoidance. It deserves to be reinforced by support from the scientific and engineering societies, and its weight-bearing characteristics may well turn on the quality of that support.

There are so few chances left to draw away some tension from the animosities that complicate the superpower interface that an understanding between the two great academies, even on limited terms, takes on more than usual significance. Although the academies are anything but strangers to each other, their working relationships have been chilled for 5 years. What brings them back to mutual discourse is the consensus of senior members of both organizations regarding the unacceptable global dangers posed by the escalating arms confrontation. Though solutions may be too much to expect, and none are being promised, there is an element of hope in the utility of the process itself.

There is a strong element of unreality to the best intentioned attempts to isolate a world power in science, even where the provocation is acute and felt deeply. When the two sides are unequal in their capacities for good science, withdrawal of contact has some effect. But when there is scientific parity in most fields, the case is quite different. Even so, it cannot have been an easy matter for the National Academy of Sciences to lift its freeze to the extent of reopening the channels of communication. No unconditional pardon has been issued that absolves the Soviets of past and present insults to scientific freedom and human rights, and there will be no dodging of these issues when the representatives of the respective academies come together. Since sanctions plainly have no visible effects on the activities of a police state, it is worthwhile to try an approach based on good offices and what appears to be a useful back channel for getting the American view across. Viewed in this light, the reapproachment between the academies could bring some measure of overdue relief for the harassed scientists whose plight will now be on the leaders' agenda. Should it turn out otherwise, controversy is likely to make the going rough.

The concept of scientific responsibility has been working its way into the moral framework of American science and its institutions for a considerable time. It seems a straightforward proposition, yet it is beset by dilemmas of choice and values, and the present case is no exception. Although a large cohort of the scientific community cannot find a good word to say for "Star Wars," their academic institutions seem to eye the prospect of sharing in the financial outlays with barely disguised satisfaction. But overall, the growing appeal of scientific responsibility is expressing itself in many ways including environmental sensitivity, self-regulation in medical research, accountability systems such as codes of ethics, concern for overpopulation, technology assessment, modeling studies on the biological and ecological effects of nuclear weapons exchanges, and initiatives to limit destabilizing weapons systems. In all these activities, disputes arise and heat is generated. But so is light.

As science and technology are swept up in the currents of civil and military passion, issues of conscience, values, and ultimately responsibility are forced to the surface, and choices must be made. Thirty years ago a presidential science adviser was heard to remark that his job produced an abundance of brilliant questions for which there were only dusty answers. The dust grows thicker.

However the idea of scientific responsibility may evolve over time, its essential relevance to the mitigation of global tension is unmistakable. This reality is the point from which to view the modest reconciliation of the American and Soviet academies of science. Against a desperate background, it comes as a welcome grace note.—WILLIAM D. CAREY